Helping cities make most of scant resources

Esther J. Cepeda

eejaycee@600words.com

Dec 7, 201001:08PM

Acouple of months ago I introduced those of you who aren't self-proclaimed urban engineering geeks to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and "GO TO 2040," the first strategic regional plan since Daniel Burnham's in 1909.

The agency acts as a regional coordinator to help Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties — and their 1,226 independent units of government — make the most of limited federal and state resources. The plan was formulated to help the entire region grow smartly by sharing the responsibility and benefits of synchronizing efforts in the areas of transportations, the environment, economic development, housing, education, human services and other factors shaping quality of life.

Policies for a better tomorrow are great, but oftentimes the hard work of implementing them is pushed to the side because of the extremely important issues that need to be dealt with in the not-as-perfect-as-we'd-like today.

But the plans CMAP spent five years finalizing aren't sitting on a shelf somewhere gathering dust while we all struggle to make it through the aftereffects of the Great Recession. The day after the plan was announced, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded CMAP \$4.25 million to fund the "GO TO 2040 Local Technical Assistance program." It will put 10 professionals out in the field to help individual municipalities create, upgrade and carry out parts of long-term plans for housing, land use and transportation. As it is now, many communities don't have experts to assign to such projects.

"We'll be contacting every mayor directly to let them know about the program, and they'll be asked to submit a simple application expressing interest in the assistance," Bob Dean, CMAP's director of local planning, told me. "We'll be sorting through those to see which requests fit best to move 'GO TO 2040' forward."

The 10 professionals should be ready to take on projects beginning in March, and the federal grant will keep them on staff for the next three years. In this time, Dean estimates, they'll be able to take 20 to 40 projects from start to finish.

"There will be a lot of minor projects that could be very quick things, such as changes to zoning ordinances that are outdated and in conflict with a town's long-term goals or in conflict with the plan," Dean said. "Projects like updating a comprehensive plan that's already in place take longer and a brand new comprehensive plan for a community could take eight months to two years, so we won't be doing a ton of those."

The impact of CMAP's technical assistance program could ripple across the region.

"We'll create things that are really applicable to many other communities' needs and establish templates," CMAP executive director Randy Blankenhorn told me. "Then when other towns update their plans, they can draw on what a similar community is out there doing, rather than starting from scratch." He added, "it's easy for us to talk about making changes and show leaders what happens in other places, but this program will show successful examples here that will lead to broader success in implementing this plan across the region."

The clock is ticking toward 2040 and this next move is just a baby step, but a grand vision for the Chicago region is definitely under way.

Copyright © 2010 — Sun-Times Media, LLC

